

Dear John,

In response to your request I am enclosing my story of World War II as a participant in one of the most unequal sea combats in History. The following is a personal account of my World War II time spent with the USS Heermann (DD 532) as an enlisted crewmember during the years 1944 and 1945.

All of these thoughts and memories of this past era are mine alone. Reliving this period in my life brings back things that were both good and bad. However if reading this stirs others to remember their part in World War II then taking the time to write this is well worth it.

All of the incidents discussed in this document are true.

(retired)

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A Seaman's Tales of the U.S.S. Heermann

A "Small boy" of Taffy 2

By: Alfred E. Mueller, Radioman 2/c (retired)

Prelude to Combat

After my enlistment in Chicago I underwent Boot training at Farragut, Idaho from August thru November of 1943. I was then transferred to Radio School at the University of Chicago. Upon graduation that school I was shipped to Mare Island, Oakland, California for re-assignment to a ship or shore station. From there I was immediately put aboard the Peter H. Burnett, a cargo / troop transport, and sent to the South Pacific Area. Once there, the members of my transit group would be assigned to our respective ships.

The voyage on the Burnett was mostly without incident. Our crossing the equator on the way south required all those first timers, called Pollywogs, to go through an initiation before King Neptune (all in good natured fun). If nothing else I never had to go through that again now that I am a Shellback.

The Burnett finally arrived at Espiritu Santo, New Hebrides in May of 1944. My assigned ship, the U.S.S. Heermann had recently been in port, but had just left for patrol duty.

During the stay that resulted in Espiritu Santo an incident occurred that I will never forget. I learned then that it is not just combat that can kill you in a war. Disease and negligence also exact their toll. That's one of the things that they never talk about in the war movies or the histories. The mess cooks at the base on Espiritu Santo had opened canned Salmon for the noon meal but neglected to take it out of the cans which they left to sit in the hot sun. As we were walking back to our barracks after the meal, sailors started dropping like flies. A short time later the affliction hit me. At the dispensary the doctor asked if I had experienced diarrhea and at the time I said no. However, I do not think he got to the door before I had to make a beeline straight for the Head. I spent at least 3 hours sitting there. Over 800 men including myself had been infected with Ptomaine Poison. By morning most of us were weak but feeling much better. Some were not so lucky as there were a dozen deaths. I was told that word of the incident never got back to the people in the States. I guess that it would have hurt civilian morale to know that their sons had traveled all that way to die, not in combat, but from some cook's gross stupidity.

After being at Espirtu Santo a few days my detachment was put on an Army Transport headed for the island of Tulagi in the Solomons group where we were told the Heerman would be based for a while. The trip on the Army Transport was uneventful and they left us off at Tulagi which is about 12 miles across "Ironbottom Sound" from the island of Guadalcanal where the Marines fought their famous battle against the Japanese. The Heermann had just left on anti-submarine patrol and they had to find a job for us. They assigned us to a Cee.Bee. (Construction Battalion) unit which was in the process of

building an Officers Club. We had the dubious honor of carrying numerous cases of liquor and other "goodies" up a steep hill to stock the building. The officer in charge was nice enough to give each of us a can of warm beer. We were very impressed by their generosity.

Within a few days the USS Heermann anchored in the bay and in June of 1944 I began my tour of duty with her. This was approximately one year after she had been commissioned on July 6, 1943. The Heermann was a "Fletcher" class fleet destroyer. At the time I joined her I was a Seaman 1/c (Radioman Striker).

Combat

The first few months aboard the Heermann seemed rather routine, in fact you could call it boring for the crew. The Heermann would go on hunter-killer patrols (searching for submarines in company with other warships) along the sea lanes from the Solomons to the Admiralties; the Carolines; and the Marshall Islands. This was the main supply route for the Central Pacific advance and had to be kept clear of Japanese sub activity. We were not successful in our hunt, and all we found was a lot of ocean.

The Heermann also escorted Navy supply and troop convoys bound for various South Pacific ports. There were any number of individual Merchant ships that she also escorted to a rendezvous with other convoys. This duty eventually took us to

Noumea, New Caledonia. Here the Heermann was given a "dazzle" black, white and grey camouflage paint job. This paint job seemed to be a prelude to bigger things for our ship. If we knew exactly how big I don't think we would have been so happy about it.

In September 1944 the Heermann became a part of the Escort Carrier Force. That Force was to provide close air support for the troops conducting the invasion of the Palau Islands. These carriers were also called "jeep" carriers since they were very small, slow and were only assigned to support duties. They were not as glamorous as the Fast Carriers of Task Force 58 or 38 who were supposed to fight the big Jap Fleet carriers and their Battle Fleet.

During all of all this time I was standing watch in the radio shack up by the Bridge. My watches were 4 hours on and 8 hours off. Practice made perfect for me, but it sure took a lot of practice. Our job was to type every coded message we heard because we never knew which one would pertain to us. The long distance radios they had at that time were Morse code type sets. They sent Dots and dashes. The radioman's job was to learn to talk in those same dots and dashes. At this early stage of my job as Radioman I knew that I made lots of mistakes. At first I could not read the "fist" or style of all the operators who were broadcasting and I wondered how anyone could decipher what I took down. The communication officer told me as long as there were two or three letters correct in each group they would still get the message. That seemed hard to believe.

With all the watches I was standing in the radio shack I was soon able to talk, drink "Jo" (coffee) and touch-type messages without any errors. It seemed like I could do it in my sleep. However, despite the improvement in my skills as a radioman, I never could get rated to 3/C. Commander Hathaway, the Captain of the Heermann kept disapproving my promotion. It seemed to me that he kept finding things I had done wrong, even if they were not wrong. But in any disagreement that a seaman has with the Captain of a ship the seaman is always the loser. This is a law of nature. My not making rate made me unhappy since I wanted the increase in pay. But as it worked out, the lack of promotion was to save my life.

Since I was not a "Rated" radioman I was assigned to the general work party list, and during General Quarters my duty station was not in the Radio shack. As a mere seaman I was not to have any "cushy" job like that. My assignment was in the after 5" magazine, which served the number four and five 5" gun, mounts. I was one of three men who placed 5" shells in the shell hoist, which would then raise them up to the gun mounts for use. You could call me a part of a human conveyor belt which served the ship's main battery. Without us feeding them the guns would have nothing to fire. I guess the theory was that machinery could break down, but so long as one of us was on his feet, the guns would still get ammo. The Magazine was below the water line right on to top of the keel. We were protected from direct shellfire in that spot, but if the ship was hit by a torpedo, or sunk our odds of getting out were pretty slim.

It was at this time that the "Word" came down from the High command that the invasion of the Philippines was to take place on October 20, 1944. The Heermann was still part of the screen for the Escort Carrier force. We were part of the Northern Carrier Group commanded by Admiral Clifton Sprague. The CVEs (escort carriers) in the group were the Fanshaw Bay, Saint Lo, White Plains, Kalinin Bay, Kitkun Bay, and Gambier Bay. The screen was made up of the Fletcher class Destroyers Hoel, Johnston, and the Heermann. The Destroyer Escorts Denis, John C. Butler, Raymond, and Samuel B. Roberts made up the rest of the screen.

Mother Nature intervened and the invasion was postponed for a while. The reason was a Typhoon which came into the invasion area. All the Destroyers and Destroyer Escorts pitched so badly that we looked like toy ships in a huge bathtub. We listed so badly that if you were standing on the bridge you could reach out and touch the water with your hand. "Old salts" talked about such weather, but to live through it was not fun at all. Our meals, if you can call them that, for those 24 hours were crackers and water. The cooks were unable to turn on the ovens to cook. We survived somehow.

The Battle of the "Small Boys"

The dawn of October 25, 1944 will be in my memory all rest of the days of my life. It was an overcast, rainy morning with rough seas which reminded us all of the Typhoon we had just been through.

The day started out routinely enough. We went to General Quarters (G. Q.) at first light, as we did practically every morning. This was the time, along with sunset, when we and the ships that we were escorting, were most vulnerable to submarine or air attack. We had to be on maximum alert just in case.

The Captain had just secured G.Q. and the crew was lining up on the Port side of the ship for morning chow when those of us in line noticed the faint specks of ships on the horizon. This caused comment by almost all of us since we were supposed to be the only ships in the immediate area. Then everything started happening at once. G.Q. started to sound and shells started to land in the water near us. We were now very certain that those ships on the horizon were not friendly.

As I ran back aft to my duty station in the 5" magazine I could see our ship and the other escorts starting to make dense funnel smoke to screen the CVEs. Once all of us were below the water line with the water tight doors closed behind us, I could feel the concussion of shells continuing to hit around the ship. By this time the Heermann was at top speed and we in the after

5" magazine could hear the sound of the propeller shafts making maximum revolutions. Needless to say the ship did not do that often and it was quite an experience. More new experiences were to come.

For the next three hours the Heermann played a deadly game with the Japanese. I could not see what was happening while it happened from where I was but after the action I compared my experiences with those of my other shipmates. It seems that to screen (protect) the CVEs we, among with the other escorts, were ordered by the Admiral to attack with our guns and torpedoes as well as to lay smoke for the Carriers to hide behind. I guess that they would rather lose us than the Carriers. Our call sign over the voice radio was "small boys". We may have been small but we did what we were told to do.

Three times we attacked the Jap heavy ships. We fired seven torpedoes the in the first attack. In the second attack we fired the last three that we had on the ship. Unlike the Japanese we could not reload our torpedo tubes once they were fired. The third time we attacked the Japanese force we had no torpedoes to shoot but the Captain went in through the smoke screen anyway. It seemed to us that he did this to draw fire from our buddies on the ships that had been hit. It was also done to scare the Japs off. At that time all we could do was scare them. We on the Heermann and the other ships of the screen threw everything we had, and then we threw in a bluff !

All through the three attacks the ship lurched and skidded through the water at top speed, jinking from side to side in as unpredictable a fashion as the Captain could manage. Down

below in the magazine this violent maneuvering threw us from side to side as we worked to get the shells up to the after gun mounts. The Captain was doing his best not to get us hit so we did not mind getting thrown around.

The only time we were not at our maximum speed was when we almost collided with the Johnston, our sister ship. She had been hit badly, and as we came barreling through our smoke screen we almost collided with her. We went to "all back full" and the sound of the screws in the after magazine was deafening as they dug in the water stopping us. Luckily we missed her and went back to full speed after the Japs.

While the torpedo attacks were going on we were very busy in the after 5" magazine. We passed up all the 5" anti-ship shells (semi-armor piercing) then we passed up all the anti-aircraft shells (V.T. fuse). Finally, we passed up the star shells, which we normally used only for night illumination. After the last of those were used up we could only sit and wait since the magazine was totally empty. We could not leave since the ship was still at G.Q. It was at that time that we all got to feeling very religious. There was no time to think early in the action and later there was too much time.

All the time that we were passing up the shells into the hoist one of the men was actually singing the song "Praise the lord and pass the ammunition". All the while he worked like a man possessed, taking shells as fast as we could pass them and demanding more and more. Just to keep up with him we had to work as just as fast. After a while we all started to sing that song too. It was much better than working in silence and just

listening to the shells hit around the ship. If you saw it in a movie you would not believe that it could possibly happen.

The magazine was not ventilated during G.Q. and it began to get very hot. The heat made us sweat rivers and so did the sounds of near misses and the tremendous noise made when the ship was hit by shellfire. During the action the Heermann was hit in the bows by an 8" armor piercing shell, which did not explode but went clean through the ship. It went through below the water line and started flooding. At this time a shell hit the ship's bridge. I think it was also an 8". It killed 8 men and wounded everyone else present in the area of the bridge except the Captain. (The crew joked later that the Captain was too thin to be hit by a shell. At that time Commander Hathaway was 6 feet 6 inches tall and weighed no more than 130 pounds.) When that shell hit the bridge area, "Oakie", the 1/C radioman and my watch supervisor, was killed at his duty station in the radio shack. This came as a big shock to me later. His loss was bad enough, but the thought of how close it was for me also made me shudder. If I had made 3/C I would also have been killed or wounded there instead of being hot, sweaty, but safe in the after 5" magazine. Sometimes promotion is not the best thing that can happen to you.

Three hours after the action began, our speed had been greatly reduced both by shell damage and by the strain on the engines. We all felt like sitting ducks at that point. But then came the announcement that we were securing from GQ. The Japanese fleet had retired over the horizon. We had won! We had fought them off! Coming up on deck I finally saw the seriousness of the shell damage that we had sustained. The

superstructure near the Bridge looked like a sieve. I also found out that the Heermann had used not only every single torpedo but also every 5" shell that we had. In addition, the crew was totally exhausted. We were not exactly happy. If the movies were reality we should have been cheering. Instead, we were too tired to cheer and we all just gave thanks to be still alive. As of that moment the crew's nickname for the Heermann changed from the "Dirty H" to the "Bloody H".

Until it became too dark to see we spent picking up survivors from our ships that had been sunk. Among the survivors we fished from the water were some men that went to Radio School with me. And also I was glad to see a fellow I graduated from High School with. He survived the sinking of the Johnston. He was waterlogged but in one piece when we hauled him on board. He and I managed to find an empty space of deck and sat down. We talked for several hours about old times, our respective ships and Navy life in general, but we said not one word about the battle we had just been in. It was too close and too frightening.

The crew learned later that what we had encountered was the main force of the Japanese surface Fleet. It consisted of 4 Battleships, 6 Heavy Cruisers, 2 Light Cruisers and 11 Destroyers. Included in this group was the Yamato, the biggest battleship in the world. We met this force with only 3 Destroyers, 4 Destroyer Escorts and the 6 CVE's whose planes also threw everything they had as long as they could. We lost the CVE Gambier Bay and the Destroyers Johnston, Hoel and the Destroyer Escort Samuel B. Roberts. Most of the other ships, like the Heermann, had been damaged. We did not do

much damage to the Japanese fleet for all of the shells and torpedoes, which we all fired. We did save most of the Escort Carriers in our group. Maybe more importantly, some of the historians say that we also saved the troop and supply transports which were then conducting the invasion of Leyte just a few short miles away. We were the only force the U. S. Navy had between the Japanese and those defenseless people. It seems that we made a difference. Our shipmates did not die in vain.

Because of total lack of main gun ammunition and torpedoes, and the damage we had sustained, the Hermann's orders were to sail to the fleet base at Ulithi Atol where they had a floating dry dock. The best they could do for us there was to patch weld a steel plate on the bow where we took the direct hit at the water line. From Ulithi we were then ordered to Pearl Harbor for further repairs. This news was to almost everyone's delight. When we finally got to Pearl we found that they were over- crowded and could not handle our damage. We then left for the Mainland and San Pedro, California. It was estimated that the work would last for a least 60 days. That meant for us a 30 day leave for each of us. Half the crew went at a time. There was only one person unhappy about our return home, and that was the Captain. He wanted to go right back out there and keep fighting the war. This sounds very patriotic but the plain fact is that the crew thought that he was nuts!

Back Home and Back out Again

When we arrived at San Pedro for repairs the name of our ship could not be revealed in the local papers due to wartime

censorship regulations. So all the newspaper articles which told the story of our fight at Samar referred to us as Destroyer "XX". The Captain was interviewed by a popular magazine at that time and his account of the battle was almost accurate. It seemed to the crew that one glaring thing was wrong in the story. His interview was full of "I did this" and "I did that". There was no mention of the crew, or what we each did. I guess in his mind we were just little cogs in his machine and were not there at all. However, despite this little discrepancy, the crew all thought that Commander Hathaway was a good Officer who stayed remarkably cool under fire and his ship handling brought us through alive.

Being a veteran ship did have its negative aspects. When the Heermannn was finally repaired, and we were ready to sail again, over 50 crew members refused to go back aboard and "jumped ship". Their reasoning was that the Japanese "had our number" and were waiting out there in the Pacific for us. They thought that our number was up. Who can blame them considering what the Heermann had gone through, and survived. We heard that they were later put on another ship and sent out after all.

The Heermann's next assignment was to join the Fast Carrier Task Forces in direct raids against the Japanese Mainland. These raids helped to demoralize the Japanese people and to prepare them for their surrender.

During the battle for Iwo Jima, the Heermann supported operations ashore by both Radar and Antisubmarine picket duty. It was during this duty that we were to sink a small wooden

vessel supplying oil to nearby submarines. It seemed like we fired an awful amount of ammunition before we were able to sink her. It must be that wooden vessels are hard to sink. There were eight survivors of which seven were picked up. The eighth would not come aboard despite all of our talking. After a while the Gunnery Officer had to give the order to shoot him. We did so and left him in the water.

The toughest part about being on picket duty was the fact that you are about 50 miles ahead of the task force relaying any enemy ships or planes in the area and you are a sitting duck. It was the beginning of the use of the Kamikaze. We were losing any number of Destroyers through these suicide dive bombers.

In the latter part of July and early August 1945 we accompanied several Battleships and CVE's to a small coastal manufacturing town to soften and shell it for invasion. Everything went so well that most of us stood on the deck and watched the proceedings. During our conversations we concluded that either the Japs were preparing for our big invasion and chose not to fire back, or they did not have much left to answer our shelling. At this late date in the war we were more inclined to believe that they were choosing not to fire at us.

On or about the middle of August 1945 when the Japanese offered to surrender, the Heermann was on Radar Picket Station a couple hundred miles southeast of Tokyo and several hours after the announced ending of the war, a suicide plane came out so close diving right for us. After firing our 5" shells and finally our 40MM guns our gunners finally hit it and it landed

about 100 feet off of the fantail. This was reported as one of the last Naval actions of World War II.

The End of the War

It was about mid September 1945 that the USS Heermann finally steamed into Tokyo Bay. We were given liberty at Yokohama. My impression of that city and I imagine all Japanese cities, was - how primitive they were. One incident that comes to mind was we were walking behind some US Marines and ahead of them was a Japanese couple, woman walking to the rear of the man carrying a number of packages. Who in turn gave them to the woman. It took several repeat performances before he finally caught on to the changed situation. All along the shoreline were hundreds of one-man submarines. This leads me to believe that although the dropping of the atomic bomb was devastating it still saved many more lives than it took. It is my opinion that shortened the war by as much as a year.

It was during this period of time I had the distinct privilege to be on radio duty when the message came through announcing the point system for the discharge of veterans. It was a 900 word message in plain language. Taking this message I was very nervous because I did not want to make any mistakes. It did not help any that I had half the crew looking over my shoulder, or it seemed that way. Thank goodness they repeated it several times during the next 24 hours.

As people do or do not know, a Destroyer does not have a Chaplain assigned to it. For quite a long time many of us had to

use our bunks as our altar. A few of us went to the captain and asked if we could hold an informal service on Sunday mornings after morning mess. He did consent and from then on the whistle blew "the cigarette light is out". I had the privilege of having a small service consisting of prayers, song and a short sermon with a question and answer period. I do not imagine it lasted over a half hour each Sunday but it sure helped all of us.

Probably the final duty I had on the Heermann came about the middle of October 1945. It is then we were ordered to take part in a Navy Day Celebration in Portland, Oregon. For those last Four months we had a new captain. When he got the orders for Portland, we proceeded at top speed. When we got to the Columbia River, a tugboat was to take us to our destination. Evidently the Captain thought the tug was going too slow and passed him up. The frantic look on that tugboat captains face was a look in disbelief. Needless to say the Captain got in a little bit of trouble over that. The crew did not mind so long as we were finally home alive.

In conclusion may I say I am still very proud to have served on the Heermann and to be able to follow up on her current status. Let me add that I am very thankful to have served on a small ship where we were all one big family.

This has been just one man's view of the Navy War Ship U.S.S. Heermann (DD532). "The Bloody H"

Post War for the Heermann

I kept a close watch as to what they would do with the Heermann and the following chronology tells the tale.

She was Decommissioned	June 1946
Recommissioned	September 1951
Departed for new base	January 1952
Voyage to Plymouth, England	June and July 1953
Departed on a World Cruise	December 1953

In April 1956 she was invited by Prince Ranier to be in port for his wedding to Miss Grace Kelly 19-24 April 1956. She furnished a 40 man Honor Guard for the occasion.

Revisted Monaco at the Personal invitation of Prince Ranier in February 1957

Decommissioned at Boston	December 1957
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In mid August 1961 she was transferred on a loan basis to the Argentina Government under the terms of the Military Assistance Program. She now serves under the Argentine Navy under the name Brown (D-20).